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Animation at the Cutting Edge

Editorial

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Though for a long time marginal to the historical and theoretical concerns of mainstream film culture, animation has recently received increasing attention from critics and scholars owing to its prominent status in contemporary screen media culture and the dramatic expansion it has undergone in the digital age. Its newly relevant significance and ubiquitous presence have inspired Chris Gehman and Steve Reinke to write that "animation has become a kind of black hole or singularity through which all of cinematic practice must now pass, emerging forever changed on the other side" (6). In her Introduction to *Pervasive Animation*, in turn, Suzanne Buchan has placed this art form within an even broader context and has observed that animation "is transforming cinema, is the basis for computer games, is used throughout the web, and advertising and propaganda learned early on of its power to astonish, influence and coerce" (1).

The digital shift in screen media not only broadens the definition of animation from "a motion picture made by photographing successive positions of inanimate objects" or "made from a series of drawings simulating motion by means of slight progressive changes" (Denslow 1) to an open form that "create[s] the illusion of movement frame-by-frame through a variety of technical applications" (Wells, *Animation* 5); importantly, it also discloses new opportunities and potential for this art with ancient roots, expanding it from a conventional conduit of often clichéd children's fantasy to an incisive means to creatively represent reality, make the invisible visible, express interiority, evoke memory, convey a wealth of experience and much more. An increasingly inventive use of animation has profoundly enriched cinematic language at both visual and narrative levels, and has sparked new debates among artists, critics and theorists on differently focussed themes, such as the relationship between animation and reality, and the impact of digital animation techniques, also calling for the crafting of new theoretical approaches for animation. It is to these current debates that this issue of *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* devoted to "Animation at the Cutting Edge" aims to contribute.

As a technique, animation is a performance of processes and as such it is an unstable field, which furthermore strongly relies on technology with its drive to produce ever-shifting frontiers of capability. Animation is a field in constant making and transformation, one that in fact exists in a state of formal fluidity and metamorphosis—for, as Paul Wells has explained, it relies on linking images "through the process of animation itself rather than through editing" (*Understanding Animation* 69). Metamorphosis is thus intrinsic to animation and so for instance it acts, as Wells has elucidated, by:

> connecting apparently unrelated images … and disrupting established notions of classical story-telling. Metamorphosis can resist logical developments and determine unpredictable linearities (both temporal and spatial) … In enabling the collapse of the illusion of physical space, metamorphosis destabilises the image. (69)

On account of its relationship to technique, technology and form, animation can thus be said to be constitutively experimental—if we understand experimentalism in art as a methodology of destabilisation (of conventions, canons, perceptions, assumptions); hence, to discuss animation at the cutting edge means to place the boundaries of its innate experimentalism at the centre of a reflection on animation as a language, as an art, as a product, as a practice.

While methodologically diverse, and focusing on radically different aspects of the frontiers of animation, including form, aesthetics, narrative, technology, industry, genre and medium, the articles that compose this issue are remarkably consistent in querying animation as a mode that "destabilises the image", that asks questions about the image and, in particular, about its relationship to reality.

In his trailblazing contribution "Chairy Tales: Object and Materiality in Animation", Paul Wells establishes the need for a more focussed theoretical appreciation of what he clarifies to be the "shifting technological and matter-based apparatus of animation" (1). Through close conceptual engagement with everyday, designer, industrial and artistic objects, with animated films and practices, and with interdisciplinary theoretical contexts, Wells puts forward a model for an understanding of the animated object as a "scripted artefact", immersed in a pre-scripted narrative that is "stimulated by knowledge, association and feeling", and that invites a new mode of perception (9). The range of the possible functions of the scripted artefact are examined in light of both the literal and the metaphorical levels that inform animation, and with reference to the profilmic, filmic, postfilmic and real-world states in which the animated object exists in the course of its life. An "Animated Object Cycle" is thus defined, and offered as an innovative framework for further study of objects and materiality in the animated film.

Also emphasising materiality, but this time through ideas of texture, feel, surface and appearance, Helen Haswell argues in "To Infinity and Back Again: Hand-drawn Aesthetic and Affection for the Past in Pixar's Pioneering Animation" that the short *La Luna* (Enrico Casarosa, 2011) makes a distinct statement through its display of hand-drawn artwork and its emphasis on man-made, grainy, imperfect textures, features that offset the clean, sharp, nonhuman appearance of contemporary computer-generated animation. For Haswell, *La Luna* makes evident the search for a new computer-generated (CG) "organic aesthetic", the seeds of which she traces back through the entire canon of Pixar's shorts, as well as its full-length features. Pixar's research is in turn influencing the style of Disney, and this blending of 2D and CG techniques is read by Haswell not only in terms of the Pixar–Disney marriage, but also as the expression of a widespread culture of nostalgia for the analogue that seems to emerge from, and to counteract the effects of, our possible digital alienation.

The animated documentary is an expanding genre in the digital era, and one that is currently attracting much scholarly attention, for it tests our understanding of issues of nonfictional representation. In her article "When Imaginary Cartoon Worlds Get the 'Documentary Look': Understanding Mockumentary Through Its Animated Variant", Cristina Formenti provides an analysis of Ash Brannon and Chris Buck's feature film *Surf's Up* (2007) and *The Simpsons'* episodes "Behind the Laughter" (2000) and "Springfield Up"

(2007), and argues that the mockumentary is a style that does not consist solely in the adoption of documentary aesthetics and structures, but also in the deployment of a number of elements, which she calls fictionality clues. The presence of these fictionality clues in animated films would seem entirely unnecessary if they were inserted for the sole purpose of flagging the already evident fictiveness of such texts; hence, Formenti argues that they are best understood as integral to mockumentary as a style which transcends the boundaries of genres, media and individual poetics.

Rotoscoping, a technique originally developed to enhance the realism of the animation of figures and movement, has been put to creative use by both Richard Linklater and Jeff Scher to explore the interface between image, consciousness and memory.

In "Tango for a Dream: Narrative Liminality and Musical Sensuality in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*", Danijela Kulezic-Wilson explores the contradictions of *Waking Life* by viewing it in the context of the filmmaker's metaphysical concerns, and analyses how Linklater's formal choices, including the rotoscoped visual style, the "narrative of digressions" (Linklater qtd. in Singer) and the choice and placement of music, resonate with the film's thematic undercurrents and its inquiry into the mysteries of existence, consciousness and time. Kulezic-Wilson argues that the tension between the film's narrative liminality and tango's erotic corporeality addresses the dualistic nature of human experience and that the film's references to Jean-Luc Godard's *Prénom Carmen* (1983) in the scoring not only evoke the French director's distrust of the film medium itself but also connect to *Waking Life*'s wider concerns with the nature of reality and the audience's perception of it.

Figure 1: Rotoscoping technique in *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001). Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. Screenshot.

Using a distinctive single-frame rotoscoping and collage animation technique, New York–based experimental filmmaker Jeff Scher created an animated trilogy, composed of *You Won't Remember This* (2007), *You Won't Remember This Either* (2009) and *You Might Remember This* (2011), to depict everyday moments in the early childhoods of his two sons Buster and Oscar. In "Rolling Amnesia and the Omnivorous Now: Jeff Scher's *You Won't Remember This* Trilogy (2007–2011)", Lilly Husbands investigates the ways in which the rotoscope collage technique is employed by Scher in the trilogy, arguing that it not only endows the works with a special capacity to emphasise the universal nature of the phenomenon of childhood amnesia, but also that, conversely, it resembles the phenomenological experience of remembering itself.

Together, then, these articles offer themselves as a fully coherent exploration of theoretical questions that are central not only to animation studies, but also to film studies more broadly. Through their accomplished reflections on animation as a form, as a set of techniques and practices, and as a field of experimentation, they jointly provide what we regard as a noteworthy scholarly contribution to a transdisciplinary understanding of the nature of the (filmic) image in its relationship to the world of objects, experiences and realities.

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